

STATEMENT OF DANIEL N. WENK, DEPUTY DIRECTOR, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES CONCERNING S. 553, TO AMEND THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS ACT TO DESIGNATE CERTAIN SEGMENTS OF THE EIGHTMILE RIVER IN THE STATE OF CONNECTICUT AS COMPONENTS OF THE NATIONAL WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS SYSTEM, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES.

May 15, 2007

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to appear before your committee today to discuss the views of the Department of the Interior on S. 553, a bill to amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act by designating segments of the Eightmile River and its tributaries as components of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

The Department supports enactment of this legislation.

S. 553 would designate 25.3 miles of the Eightmile River and its tributaries as part of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, administered by the Secretary of the Interior. The River would be managed in accordance with the Eightmile River Watershed Management Plan with the Secretary coordinating with the Eightmile River Coordinating Committee. The bill authorizes the Secretary to enter into cooperative agreements with the State of Connecticut, the towns of Lyme, East Haddam, and Salem, Connecticut, and appropriate local planning and environmental organizations.

The Eightmile River is located in the lower Connecticut River watershed in south central Connecticut. Its name comes from the fact that the river is located eight miles from the mouth of

the Connecticut River. Fifteen miles of the Eightmile River and its East Branch through the communities of Lyme, East Haddam, and Salem, Connecticut are included on the National Park Service's Nationwide Rivers Inventory of potential wild and scenic river segments. Both segments are included on the inventory for outstanding scenic, geologic, fish and wildlife values. In addition to those values, the draft report also documents outstandingly remarkable water quality, hydrologic, and cultural resource values. Over eighty percent of the Connecticut River watershed is still forested, including large tracts of unfragmented hardwood forests that are home to a diverse assemblage of plants and animals including bobcats, Great Horned Owls, red foxes, and the Cerulean Warbler.

P.L. 107-65, the Eightmile Wild and Scenic River Study Act of 2001, authorized a study of the Eightmile River for potential inclusion in the Wild and Scenic Rivers System. As a part of the study, the National Park Service worked with the communities of Lyme, East Haddam, and Salem, Connecticut; the State of Connecticut; The Nature Conservancy; and local conservation interests to study the natural and cultural resources of the Eightmile River and develop a management plan to conserve those special values. The resulting Eightmile River Watershed Management Plan (December, 2005) was brought before special town meetings in each of the communities and was overwhelmingly supported by the public, as was the plan's recommendation to seek Wild and Scenic River designation. While the study is still under final Departmental review, it has preliminarily concluded that the proposed segments of the Eightmile River and its tributaries are eligible for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System because of their free-flowing nature and outstandingly remarkable scenic, geologic, fish and wildlife values.

S. 553 would implement the environmentally preferred alternative contained in the draft study report, which was released for public review and comment in July 2006. This draft report highlights a watershed ecosystem that is unique within the State of Connecticut in terms of its intact hydrology, water quality and ecosystem health. The commitment of local, state and non-governmental partners is also exemplary. Having already been through a local town meeting process, only one comment was received on the draft report – a letter of support from the State Park Director for the State of Connecticut. Consequently, while the study and the accompanying Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) document has not been finalized, the National Park Service does not anticipate making any changes in the study recommendations based on public comments.

If S. 553 is enacted, the Eightmile River will be administered as a partnership wild and scenic river, similar to other recent designations in the northeast, including the Farmington River in Connecticut and the Musconetcong River in New Jersey. This approach emphasizes local and state management solutions, and has proven effective as a means of protecting outstandingly remarkable natural, cultural and recreational resource values without the need for direct federal management or land acquisition.

This concludes my prepared remarks, Mr. Chairman. I will be happy to answer any questions you or other committee members may have regarding this bill.